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ABSTRACT

Noting that while the arts world has responded angrily to recent cuts in the budget of the National Endowment for the Arts, it has tended to ignore the total elimination of an even bigger funding source for the arts--the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) program. To illustrate the importance of CETA to the arts, the paper first provides an overview of the role it has played in the arts from its inception in 1973, then provides a case study on one program--Philadelphia's People's Light and Theatre Company (PLTC)--which drew heavily on CETA support. After a brief discussion of the early years of the PLTC, the paper explains how it grew with the help of CETA funding and began to weaken when that funding was cut. The paper concludes that while a single case study cannot yield definitive conclusions about the impact of CETA arts funding, it might prompt further research into a phenomenon that might possibly have matched in scope the Federal Theatre project of the 1930s, and might also allow the formulation of hypotheses about the effects CETA support may have had on hundreds of other theatre organizations. (FL)

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CETA/Arts/PLTC: A Lost Equation in Arts Funding

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CETA/Arts/PLTC: A Lost Equation in Arts Funding¹

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The early days of the Reagan administration produced great consternation in the arts community when, from the Office of Management and Budget [OMB] Reagan appointee David Stockman launched what Kevin Mulcahy has called "a preemptive strike,"² a proposal to cut the appropriation for the National Endowment for the Arts [NEA] by almost 50%. As one would expect, artists and their Congressional supporters raised an angry hue and cry in defense of the Endowment. Though a few conservative voices like Charlton Heston rose in defense of the administration,³ most of the arts community shared the feeling expressed by the Theatre Communications Group: " . . . the 'no frills' Reagan Administration clearly sees the arts as a frill."⁴

The arts world's response to the situation is not surprising. What is noteworthy is that the debate focused on cuts in the NEA budget while virtually ignoring the total elimination of an even bigger funding source for the arts, perhaps, indeed, the biggest ever, the CETA program. In broad terms, the NEA, whose budget reached an all time high of \$158.5 million in FY 1981, and which suffered a cut to \$143.04 million for FY 1982,⁵ was losing \$15 million while an estimated \$200 million reaching the arts through the Department of Labor's Comprehensive Employment and Training Act [CETA] program was being eliminated. Why

should a loss to the arts of about \$15 million cause a greater outcry than the loss of \$200 million? The answers are easy to see.

First, the Endowment is so important as a symbol of a national commitment to the arts that even a small cut in its budget portends a renunciation of that commitment. As the rise of the NEA has been accompanied by increased levels of corporate arts giving,⁶ NEA's decline might trigger the fall of private support. NEA dollars are important beyond their number. Second, just as artists pay attention to the NEA because it was created expressly to address their interests, they were likely to ignore the fate of CETA precisely because it was in no way created for the arts. Some arts people discovered they could use CETA to their advantage and did, but those who did not actually exploit its potential tended to pay no more attention to it than to any other program housed in the Department of Labor. [DOL] CETA was not their business; NEA was. Finally, even those members of the arts community who had received CETA money had little sense of CETA's national impact on the arts. How could they when DOL itself did not know? As a DOL Fact Sheet expressed it in 1979, "although CETA is the largest funding source for the arts, little is known of the effect of funding, either on the arts or on the CETA target areas of community and economic development and job creation."⁷

This report will address in a small way the impact of CETA money on the arts. The report's specific focus is the relationship between CETA and a single theatre organization, Philadelphia's People's Light and Theatre Company, [PLTC] an organization which drew heavily on CETA support almost from its birth, and which stands now as the leading theatre company of the Philadelphia area. Though the examination of a single case cannot yield definitive conclusions about the impact of CETA arts funding, it may serve to prompt further research into an as yet barely investigated phenomenon as big, and perhaps as important as the Federal Theatre of the 30's. It may also allow the formulation of hypotheses about the effects CETA support may have had on the hundreds of theatre organizations which received it.

The author first became aware of CETA support for the theatre during the preparation of an American Theatre Association report, Older Americans on Stage.⁸ Among a crudely surveyed population that

clearly represented only a fraction of senior adult theatre organizations, there were discovered sixteen theatre groups receiving CETA support. When an interview at DOL revealed that the Federal Government had no idea exactly how much CETA money went into the arts in general or theatre in particular, it became apparent that the arts impact of CETA was a worthwhile research topic. The People's Light and Theatre Company agreed to give the author access to its files and personnel, and during the Spring of 1981 the author spent a number of days interviewing PLTC personnel and exploring files. In any case study, the researcher should be open to all sorts of discoveries, but the author was particularly alert for data that tended to answer the following questions: 1) what quality of personnel did the CETA money (which had to be spent primarily on manpower) bring to PLTC? 2) what problems, if any, did the association between PLTC and Chester County Manpower, the local CETA sponsor, bring to the theatre? and 3) how important, finally, was CETA funding to the growth of PLTC?

What this report will not address in any way is the artistic quality of PLTC productions. In the context of this report, success is measured not by artistic quality but by growth in audience, company, reputation, and budget. The report will examine the relationship between that kind of success--which PLTC has enjoyed to a large degree--and CETA funding.

Before turning to that relationship, it is in order to offer a brief overview of CETA and the arts and a short history of PLTC.

CETA and the Arts

The impact of CETA on the arts has been largely ignored. For example, when the Philadelphia Inquirer addressed the crisis in arts funding, it concentrated on Theatre Center Philadelphia's loss of a \$3,000 NEA grant, not mentioning CETA funding losses to two local theatres which far outstripped that figure.⁹ When the New York Times addressed the topic, it, too, concentrated on falling Endowment funds. With unintended irony, the Times captioned a photo of La Mama's Medea with a citation of the La Mama Endowment grant but failed to mention its receipt of over \$1,000,000 in CETA support.¹⁰ In Theatre Facts '81, the Theatre Communications Group reported on theatre support at all major levels of government without mentioning CETA, although CETA money appeared at state, county, and city levels. In its "Special Report," Theatre Communications Group did give CETA a bare mention--some forty vague words concerning CETA's likely demise--but devoted three pages to the loss of NEA money.¹¹

These reporters are not to be blamed for giving short shrift to CETA arts support. They had little access to hard data enumerating CETA arts contributions because, at the time, not even DOL, CETA's parent organization, knew how much money CETA was putting into the arts. By way of explanation, a consulting firm reported to DOL in 1979 that " . . . the Employment Division doesn't have a category for artists and so there is no way to determine exactly how many artists there really are."¹² The problem was that although

local CETA sponsors had to report their expenditures to DOL, they did so in terms of CETA titles under which the money was being spent and with no reference to occupational areas. Thus, DOL could not examine CETA impact with respect to job classifications.¹³ By late 1981, when DOL finally began to receive good information on the subject, the death of CETA had been decreed, and DOL lost interest in bringing CETA and the arts to the public's attention.

The Comprehensive Employment and Training Act was enacted in 1973, the same year that the People's Light and Theatre Company was founded. Before that, manpower programs had been conducted under the Manpower Development and Training Act of 1962. CETA's establishment set the stage for the decentralization of manpower programs by delegating to state and local governments--prime sponsors--the control of specific expenditures, an element of the CETA program which would prove very significant to the arts.

In 1974, arts administrators began to submit requests to prime sponsors under CETA Title VI, the Public Service Employment [PSE] program. Louisa Kreisberg of the American Council for the Arts credits San Francisco's Neighborhood Arts Program, a multi-faceted project involving community garden development, mural painting, and theatre for children, the aged, and the institutionalized, with employing in 1975 the nation's first CETA artists.¹⁴

Title VI incorporated a counter cyclical feature--its appropriation was indexed to unemployment. Thus, rising joblessness in 1979 produced an increase in CETA funds with the result that prime sponsors issued more requests for proposals, which, in turn, produced a rise in the

number of arts organizations requesting support. The number of CETA funded arts positions nationwide rose from an estimated 3,000 in 1975 and 1976¹⁵ to 5,200 at an estimated expenditure of \$52 million in FY 1977.¹⁶

1977 saw a doubling in overall CETA funding, because of which, as the NEA reported, "many arts organizations were able to increase their staffs dramatically, thereby initiating a wealth of cultural activity . . ."¹⁷ How dramatic that growth was may be seen in a single contract: from November 1977 through October 1978, La Mana ETC drew CETA funds totalling \$681,138, which paid for some fifty positions in its "Creative Enterprise for Art" project.¹⁸

Total CETA spending reached its high water mark of nine and a half billion dollars in FY 1978.¹⁹ Recognizing the growing CETA investment in the arts, DOL Assistant Secretary Ernest Green created in 1978 the position of national CETA/Arts Coordinator, to be charged especially with finding out just how much CETA money was going into the arts, there being no system whereby prime sponsors automatically identified and reported arts spending. For 1978, Green's estimate of CETA arts expenditures was \$75 million.

By FY 1979, the authorization for CETA's Title VI alone was \$3 billion. Still guessing, DOL estimated CETA expenditures for artists and "art support personnel" at \$200 million for FY 1979, calling that "the largest single financial contribution to American culture in the history of this nation."²⁰ In August of 1979, at New York's Hotel Roosevelt, DOL sponsored a CETA workshop, "Putting the Arts

to Work." Addressing the conferees, Secretary Green announced hopes to raise the number of CETA supported arts jobs to 30,000.²¹ Even as he spoke, however, artists in the street outside the hotel were picketing in protest of forecast cuts in CETA's overall funding.²² CETA and the Arts were already entering decline.

Several factors contributed to the rapid fall off of CETA funding. The FY 1980 appropriation was cut, in part as a response to lower unemployment, and in part because of disenchantment with CETA's performance as a solution to manpower problems. Reported abuses in various CETA projects weakened congressional support. In that context, CETA arts problems proved almost as attention getting as had those of the Federal Theatre under the WPA. For example, the press was quick to direct attention to the employment of Mrs. John Erlichman in a \$10,000 CETA job with the Seattle Symphony.²³ On the local level, some officials were losing their enthusiasm for CETA because tightened CETA hiring guidelines were narrowing their choices of workers, whereas they had previously been able, under loose regulations, to hire their pick of the unemployed.²⁴

But most important, finally, was the advent of Reaganomics. As part of its initial attack on domestic spending, the Reagan administration opted in 1981 to eliminate the support of public sector jobs under CETA Titles II and VI.²⁵ Title VI was the most important channel for funding cultural employment and training activities, and public service employment in general provided the bulk of CETA arts support. Thus, the decision

spelled an effective end to the CETA/Arts phenomenon. According to Morgan Management, DOL's CETA/Arts research firm, the death of public service employment eliminated 98% of CETA/Arts.²⁶

By the end of 1981, an estimated 340,000 CETA public service jobs had been eliminated.²⁷ How many of those were in the arts may never be clearly established, for one of the casualties of the CETA decline was DOL sponsored research into the scope of CETA/Arts. As a DOL Employment and Training Administration official put it in May of 1981, CETA/Arts was "down the tube," and a continuation of CETA/Arts data gathering was no longer possible because it might be seen as an attempt to fight for CETA/Arts.²⁸ Thus, in November of 1980, hard on the heels of the Reagan victory, Office of Management and Budget had put a stop order on the CETA/Arts Contractor Survey.

Having become in only a few years perhaps the largest federal arts intervention ever, CETA metamorphosed even more rapidly into a historical phenomenon and ceased to exist as of 30 September 1982.

As a substitute for CETA, the Administration introduced the Job Training Partnership Act [JTPA] signed 13 October 1982 and implemented 1 October 1983.²⁹ JTPA's expenditures for its initial year, FY 1984, were projected as \$3.5 billion³⁰ which, though not comparable to CETA at its peak, makes it capable of major impact. However, JTPA differs from CETA in several significant aspects which will tend to minimize its arts impact. First, it includes no public service jobs component, thus

eliminating many of the avenues through which CETA money reached the arts. Second, JTPA includes no income transfer feature. That is, whereas up to 70% of CETA dollars went to stipends of those employed under CETA,³¹ JTPA allows for no living expense stipends. Instead, DOL promises that 70% of JTPA dollars will go directly to training as opposed to 18% under CETA.³² This ought to increase the amount of training delivered, but will tend to prevent organizations from using the money to buy labor as they could under CETA. Third, the Private Industrial Councils designated to provide local governance must be headed by business executives who, many will assume, may be biased toward training in skills they understand, not training in such exotica as dancing, painting, or stage management.

As a federal arts funding source, CETA had several characteristics which made it different from the funding sources we ordinarily associate with the arts. First, like the WPA of the 30's, CETA was a job program, not a vehicle for raising cultural standards or enriching the cultural life of the nation. It was true, as NEA has pointed out, that "the goals of CETA often do coincide with the goals of an arts organization--i.e., to provide experience and wages to persons who can contribute to both the arts and the community as a whole."³³ And it was also true that CETA demonstrated the power of the culture industry to provide significant numbers of jobs for the unemployed.³⁴

But such a convergence of goals was fortuitous in the eyes of DOL, whose real concern was CETA's primary mandate, the alleviation of structural unemployment nation-wide, economy-wide, in any and all

industries. Thus, CETA/Arts funding differed in its essence from NEA, state arts council, or private foundation funding generated specifically as art support.

Second, CETA differed significantly from the WPA as to its target population. The WPA arts projects were designed specifically to employ already skilled professionals in their fields. The stated goal of the Federal Theatre Project was that 90% of its employees be theatre professionals on relief.³⁵ As the manual of the Federal Theatre Project expressed it, the primary aim was "the re-employment of theatre workers now on public relief roles"³⁶ CETA, on the other hand, aimed at training large numbers of the structurally unemployed. It was established not to re-employ in their profession but to make people ready for employment in professions for which they had been up till then unqualified. This goal divergence explains major differences in the ways WPA and CETA arts funds were distributed nationally. In "Government Patronage: An Historical Overview," Mankin points out that many states had very little Federal Theatre activity because they had few or no theatre professionals to enroll.³⁷ CETA, on the other hand, could put money into the arts anywhere as long as a local cadre could claim to train unskilled people in an art. (In both programs, of course, the degree to which these divergent criteria for enrollment were observed is debateable.)

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Second, although CETA disbursed millions of dollars that were spent in and on the arts, DOL was not an arts funding decision-maker like the NEA or other arts support agencies. As the Washington Post put it,

CETA is not actually a federal program at all--simply a mechanism for letting grants and contracts to more than 40,000 state and local agencies. . . . Because it is run primarily by local government officials, it is no better and no worse than local government in general.³⁸

In other words, through the Endowment, the federal government is a patron of the arts, supporting artists and arts organizations of which it approves. But in CETA, the federal government left the decisions about which artists (or, for that matter, bricklayers) to support to officials at the state, county, and city levels. This, of course, goes far toward explaining the level of ignorance of CETA's arts impact at DOL; DOL was dependent for its knowledge of arts expenditures on a wide variety of local agencies, each of which had its own reporting habits. In this, CETA differed crucially from its predecessor, the WPA. Although politics might inhibit any decision, WPA administrator

Harry Hopkins had the power to hire and fire regional and state officials. Within Federal One--those WPA programs devoted to the arts--Federal Theatre Director Hallie Flanagan had authority to appoint regional and state directors. At the regional level, Flanagan appointed experienced theatre men as directors, among them E. C. Mabie, Elmer Rice, Glenn Hughes, and Jasper Deeter, whose famed Hedgerow Theatre was in 1973 the jumping off point for the group of young people who would found PLTC.³⁹

WPA arts project expenditures, then, were overseen by knowledgeable arts people answerable to a knowledgeable arts administrator in Washington. In CETA, to the contrary, the doling out of funds was in the hands of some 500 prime sponsors. The prime sponsor, a unit of municipal or county government, a consortium of several local jurisdictions, or a governor's representative coordinating otherwise unrepresented areas of a state, could choose to fund any organization which, in its estimation, would deliver jobs or job training services required to meet local employment and training needs. In short, CETA was governed by a decentralized decision making system under which any benefits to the arts were largely a matter of chance:

If CETA was to serve artists, the effort had to begin at the local level between Prime Sponsors and local arts organizations because of the decentralized nature of the Act. The Department of Labor has a program without an arts policy.⁴⁰

Should a prime sponsor happen to include on its staff an informed arts advocate, local arts organizations might do well in enlisting aid. But should such a sympathetic ear be lacking, local arts support possibilities might be very slim.

It also follows that because the granting agencies were local and widely varied in policy and style, the ability of an arts organization to win and hold CETA support might depend largely on the capacities of its own management personnel to form good relationships with prime sponsor personnel. As we shall see, PLTC formed an effective working relationship with Chester County Manpower, the prime sponsor for its locality.

Third, although money was expended under six of CETA's eight titles--Titles II, III, IV, VI, VII, and VIII--money for the arts came for the most part through Title VI, Countercyclical Public Service Employment Programs. While some arts programs obtained funds under Title II (Comprehensive Employment and Training Services) and Title VII (Private Sector Opportunities for the Economically Disadvantaged), Title VI, by virtue of its authorization to support the employment of individuals in actual jobs for up to 18 months, was the natural target for arts organizations seeking to cover personnel costs. As Margaret Wyszomirski puts it, "since the arts are essentially a labor-intensive service industry, they can be easily tied to the general issues of jobs and employment."⁴¹ That is, arts organizations spend most of their money on salaries and will always be quick to take advantage of labor support. Indeed, as DOL pointed out, the 1976 increase in Title VI monies produced a sudden upsurge of CETA/Arts proposals.⁴² During CETA's peak years, 1978 and 1979, Title VI arts contractors outnumbered contractors under the next most important title, Title II, by about five to one.⁴³

While Title VI was very important to arts organizations, their natural reliance on it eventually proved a liability, for Title VI was

an immediate target of the new Reagan administration. In February 1981, OMB proposed the total elimination of public sector CETA jobs--Title VI.⁴⁴ In March of 1981, hoping thereby to save \$635 million in the then current fiscal year, the Administration froze hiring under Titles II and VI. On the 21st of March, Assistant Secretary for Employment and Training Albert Angrisani announced that the freeze would result in a 47,000 job reduction per month for six months and justified the cut by pointing out that CETA's basic purpose was training and that Title VI produced little training per se.⁴⁵

Thus, though President Reagan could hardly be accused of harboring an antipathy toward the arts, he dealt the arts a blow by choosing to effect a saving in Title VI, the area of CETA to which the arts had taken the most recourse. The result was that, although CETA as a whole would live until September 1982, many arts organizations, PLTC among them, would find their CETA support lines effectively withdrawn by mid-1981.

Any consideration of CETA's arts impact should take note of certain features unique to CETA which might stand as drawbacks not to be encountered with other funding sources. For example, the prime sponsor was empowered to oversee the spending of the organization's regular program income. This meant that the prime sponsor could deduct from the contract award a figure equal to part or all of box office income if it deemed the use of that income inappropriate.

Another concern to an arts organization seeking to expand its capacities through CETA support was the fact that CETA funds were earmarked for salaries and fringe benefits and not to be used for materials or supplies. Thus, if a theatre were to hire a person as an actor, it would need to find elsewhere the money for the actor's costumes and

make-up.⁴⁶ The more rigidly the prime sponsor chose to interpret the general guidelines, the greater these difficulties might become.

Moreover, before an arts organization could hire the personnel to be paid by CETA funds, it would have to adjust its hiring decisions to meet eligibility requirements, a problem not encountered in the spending of other grants. For example, the organization could hire only residents of the prime sponsor's geographic area; it could hire only the currently unemployed; and, as time went on, it could hire only those whose job skills were so poor that they could be described as approaching unemployability. Indeed, CETA worker quality is a commonly cited problem area. Contributing to this problem, according to Nellum, was the inclination of state and local employment security agencies--the conduit for CETA workers--to discourage artists from registering under arts occupation titles on the grounds that they would be harder to place than if they were to register in other, more common categories.⁴⁷ Another contributing factor was the habit of some employment security agencies of presenting single candidates for CETA job openings instead of arranging for the CETA employer to review the qualifications of all eligible candidates.⁴⁸

These irritations grew when the 1978 CETA Reauthorization and Amendments demanded a greater emphasis on the hard-core unemployed, and the program lost its attractiveness for a variety of employers who had previously been able to "cream," that is, select only candidates whose skill levels made them easily employable, but now found themselves forced to hire genuinely uneducated and unskilled people.⁴⁹ Those arts organizations who found themselves employing such marginal workers might well have wished CETA were governed by a principle Hallie Flanagan had been able to promulgate for the Federal Theatre Program in

1935:

The federal Theatre Project is designed to reemploy only such members of the theatrical profession as are skilled enough to have a reasonable chance to make a living in the theatre later; . . . ⁵⁰

Although Flanagan's standard must have been subject to breach, McDonald generally confirms the consistent practice of seeking to hire professionals;⁵¹ and Mackin points out that even when the pressure to enroll large numbers of the unemployed quickly was greatest, Federal One was able to recruit at a high level of competence.⁵²

But CETA/Arts was supposed to be an employer of the unskilled, and, as such, bears examination as a populist rather than an elitist form of government arts support. Adams and Goldbard have expressed these competing tendencies as "democratizing existing arts programs" and "promoting cultural democracy."⁵³ The former refers to bringing the general public into contact with "high culture of sacrosanct value"⁵⁴ and implies the awarding of subsidies to professional artists and arts organizations that have already attained status. "Promoting cultural democracy" refers to culture "in the process of becoming"⁵⁵ and implies the support of both unproven aesthetics and untried artists and organizations. This dichotomy represents the basic debate in American arts funding. The elitists, of whom Robert Brustein might be called the doyen, fight to have money channeled more or less exclusively into top rank establishment arts programs. As Ruth

Mayleas, former director of the NEA Theatre Program, put it, "the real problem is to weed out those who aren't very good . . . to withhold funds."⁵⁶ The populists like Goldbard decry the tendency of major givers like the NEA to deny funding to "poor, minority, rural, experimental arts organizations."⁵⁷

Unlike NEA, however, CETA had no arts standards and, therefore, no prejudice in favor of an elite. Indeed, if the individual officers who made the CETA prime sponsor decisions about granting funding support had personal arts standards, they would tend to be those of cultural middle America, not those of the NEA decision makers, men and women who were nurtured on high art. Thus, the CETA officer might be expected to lean toward the populist of cultural democracy side, as we shall observe when we consider PLTC's CETA history.

The People's Light and Theatre Company

In late 1973, five alumni of Moylan, Pennsylvania's Hedgerow Theatre incorporated themselves as the People's Light and Theatre Company. That winter they produced their first play, a children's piece called The Friendly Beast, which premiered as a free performance at a nursing home and thereafter played paid dates around Chester County schools through June 1974. In July 1974, at Strode's Mill, a West Chester mill converted to an 85 seat playhouse, PLTC presented its first general audience play, The Emperor Jones. The five founders, Danny and Meg Fruchter, Richard Keeler, Tom Teti, and Ken Marini, drew \$40 a week salaries and financed their venture with \$4,000 from a relative of Meg Fruchter and \$8,000 from their landlord, sculptor Harry Waite.

In 1975, producing such plays as The Homecoming, Othello, and The Good Woman of Setzuan, PLTC established itself with local audiences and suburban newspaper critics. For the fiscal year ending June 1976, the theatre was operating in the \$25,000 per annum budget range, supplemented by much volunteer labor and the willingness of its full time workers to exist on \$50 per week.

Growth was impossible with an 85 seat auditorium, so in mid-1976, PLTC moved to a new 200 seat house, a converted stone barn at the Center for the Performing Arts in Chester Springs where, on 24 July, they opened with Mother Courage. In FY 1977, their first in the larger theatre, PLTC's budget reached the \$100,000 mark.

From 1976 through 1978, PLTC mounted 21 mainstage productions at Chester Springs. At the same time, it continued a heavy schedule of ancillary activities which contributed to its image as a quasi-public Chester County Agency. These activities included touring children's theatre productions to schools and libraries, performing in local prisons and juvenile detention centers, and offering theatre workshops in schools and custodial care centers. The permanent staff grew to 23.

In 1978, however, the company was threatened when its landlord decreed that PLTC would be guaranteed only 12 weeks of residency at the Center for the Performing Arts during 1979 and each year thereafter. In response, PLTC sought a permanent home for secure year round operation. Launching a successful building fund drive and cutting costs by using company labor, PLTC obtained and renovated a stone barn and farm house in Malvern, Chester County. In May, 1979, PLTC opened its new theatre with Rashomon. The current plant consists of a 400 seat main stage, a 75 seat second stage, and offices scattered through the sprawling converted farm house. In 1980, PLTC's first year in the new plant, the budget passed \$300,000. For 1981, the budget projection would be \$518,528, and for 1982, \$610,728.

Part of the rapid budget rise is related to PLTC's entering a "developmental agreement" with Actors Equity in 1980. During this same

period, PLTC began to take on the identity of an establishment theatre of the Philadelphia area, its productions becoming the object of major critical attention. This was clearly demonstrated when the theatre, whose shows only a few years before had been covered only in suburban weeklies, was cited in 1981 by Philadelphia Magazine as the area's best repertory theatre.⁵⁸

The rapid growth of PLTC bears a strong relationship to its aggressive and effective fund raising and public relations. In addition to winning support from such foundations as the Pew Memorial Trust and the William Penn Foundation, PLTC energetically courted individual donors. The Malvern theatre's opening night program acknowledged some 400 individual givers. During the building fund drive of 1978-79, PLTC took in \$103,573 in donations.⁵⁹ Thus, an examination of CETA's role in PLTC's development must be pursued with the consciousness that PLTC has demonstrated an outstanding capacity to take advantage of a variety of funding sources. Not every fledgling organization, run by relative juniors with no previous associations with major theatres could be expected to feed its growth so effectively, either from private or public sources.

While PLTC's material growth is to be credited to its entire staff, the primary force was unquestionably its principal officer, Danny Fruchter. Though functioning as an actor and occasional director, Fruchter has dominated the decision processes of the theatre, not only making basic production policy decisions, but representing the theatre to both audiences and financial institutions. Fruchter assumes the

style of La Mama's Ellen Stewart welcoming the audience to most performances and working hard to build a bond between them and PLTC. With the same easy but aggressive approach, the Hedgerow alumnus maintains a constant stream of communication with banks, government agencies, private givers, and the press. As the following will demonstrate, this energetic outreach had much to do with the CETA/PLTC connection.

PLTC and CETA

In 1975, Fruchter asked Chester County Manpower to fund two positions at PLTC--a full time artistic director at \$10,000 per year, and a costumer at \$6,000.⁶⁰ In support of PLTC's claim of public service employment eligibility, Fruchter identified PLTC as a non-profit educational institution and cited its activities at the Chester County prison and the County juvenile detention center. Manpower funded the two positions, thus starting PLTC's CETA history and establishing its early pattern of successfully engaging qualified personnel through CETA funding--the costumer taken on under the CETA grant had five years of costuming experience and an Ivy League art history degree; the artistic director had a long history of professional theatre experience and an Obie Award.* The two workers began their Title VI contract duties on 8 September 1975. As Fruchter pointed out in an interview with the author, Chester County's initial loose interpretation of CETA guidelines allowed PLTC to put under CETA contract persons who had already been associated with the theatre. The first two CETA workers fit that

*In consideration of their privacy, CETA contract personnel will not be herein named. Whatever their qualifications, the association with CETA and its connotations of low employability might not be to their liking.

category, as would others put under contract during the early CETA period. Later, Chester County would forbid issuing CETA contracts to persons who had already worked for PLTC, even in a volunteer capacity.

On 1 January 1976, a second batch of Title VI workers joined PLTC. Three were listed as actors and earned minimum wage, one was listed as costume designer at \$3.30 per hour, and the last as children's theatre director at \$3.45 per hour. All but the costume designer position were justified as public service children's theatre performers, and PLTC began touring County schools with two shows, one for K through 3rd, and one for 4th through 6th. But, as PLTC Audience Development Director Rob Lohrmanⁿ pointed out in an interview, though he joined PLTC as a CETA children's theatre performer in that group, it was "tacitly understood" by Lohrmanⁿ that he was available for all PLTC needs, "twelve hours a day--often."⁶¹ Thus, while PLTC was justifying increased CETA support with public service children's theatre, it was also able to use the support for the general strengthening of the theatre.

Fruchter cemented the relationship with Chester County Manpower by assiduous letter writing and phone calling, as well as complementary theatre tickets. After seeing PLTC's production of Lenny, Manpower Executive Director Larry Boling was convinced of the company's professionalism.⁶² By March 1977, PLTC had been granted public service contracts for 16 people, who had, during varied lengths of service, drawn down some \$54,000.⁶³ Of PLTC's total 1976 revenue of \$122,617, Manpower's contribution was \$31,418, or more than 25%.

Not only did PLTC enjoy success winning initial job grants, it also succeeded in persuading Manpower to extend individual contracts beyond the standard allowable length, which was 18 months. An actress signed to an initial contract in November 1976 received four extensions from Manpower, the last with specific proviso that there would not be another extension forthcoming, and so continued on CETA funds through February 1979, a total of 28 months. PLTC was also granted four extensions on a technician who started in August 1976 and continued on CETA money through January 1979, 30 months. In those two cases alone, Manpower had enabled PLTC to reap the benefit of 20 man months beyond the supposed maximum, a clear indication of Manpower's positive attitude toward the theatre and the flexibility that allowed it to express that attitude in practical terms.

PLTC did much to earn Manpower's supportive attitude, however. As a prime sponsor, Manpower's first priority was converting CETA workers to regular employees on the contractor payroll, and Manpower gave PLTC every encouragement in that line: " . . . County promised us that for every employee we picked up . . . they would also fund a new employee."⁶⁴ Fruchter played his part and shifted many CETA workers to the regular payroll--Rob Lohrmanⁿ and the actress mentioned above made that transition. In this reciprocal manner, Manpower stimulated PLTC's growth, and the theatre promoted Manpower's objectives. The relationship burgeoned steadily. By 1979, PLTC's Manpower income had reached \$5,000 per month. The 1979 total was \$50,546, approximately 20% of the year's expanded budget.

Unfortunately, as rapidly as CETA's contribution to PLTC's growth had risen, it was now to decline even faster. The FY 1980 national cuts made themselves felt when Fruchter's March 1980 request for a carpenter's position⁶⁵ was denied with word of an indefinite freeze on all Title VI PSE programs.⁶⁶ By the end of the year, CETA income had fallen to \$8,500 per quarter, and PLTC's anticipated revenue estimate for all of 1981 included only \$16,000 for CETA income, a bare 3% of the theatre's half million dollars projected budget.

The shock of the cutbacks to a theatre that had grown accustomed to subsidized growth was great. Fruchter freely conceded that had he anticipated the severity of the CETA cuts he might have hesitated to commit PLTC to an Equity agreement that contributed heavily to expanding the company salary line from \$174,000 in 1980 to \$319,000 for 1981. A period was put to the PLTC/CETA connection in the 1982 projected budget issued in June of 1980. Total projected expenses were \$610,728; the income table retained a Manpower line, but the figure at its end was "-0-."⁶⁷ Speaking informally in June of 1982, Fruchter reported a projected income shortfall for the year of approximately \$50,000, almost the precise amount that PLTC had been receiving from Manpower at the peak of its support. By Fall of 1983, the new pattern of austerity was clear. The annual number of productions had declined from eleven in 1982 to nine in 1983 and a projected eight for 1984. Reflecting a necessary shift of resources from adjustable artistic areas to the inflexible needs of support services, the average cast size had declined from ten in 1982 to eight and a half in 1983 and a projected six for 1984. The burst of growth achieved with the help of CETA could not be maintained without it.⁶⁸

In the aftermath of PLTC's experience with this unique form of government arts support, several issues present themselves for special attention. The first is the matter of worker quality. In the early years of the CETA/PLTC connection, the personnel quality problems cited by Nellums were not apparent. From 1976 to 1979, the quality of CETA personnel was, in Fruchter's estimation, very high. The reasons are easy to find. Chester County Manpower pursued a very liberal policy of personnel assignment. If PLTC were approached by a qualified job seeker whom it could not pay but was otherwise interested in, it would send the applicant to Manpower. " . . . we would say, 'no, we don't have any money, but perhaps CETA, CETA's looking for people and you may qualify.'" ⁶⁹ The chances were good that Manpower would send the person back to PLTC and a CETA contract would ensue. "We had a cooperative arrangement with Manpower." ⁷⁰

But, in 1978, the honeymoon ended when President Carter signed the reenactment bill (27 October 1978), which significantly changed hiring criteria. On 17 January 1979, Manpower informed PLTC that participant eligibility criteria had been "considerable tightened." ⁷¹ Included among the new criteria were lengthened minimum periods of unemployment, lowered family income ceilings, and a newly imposed PSE wage average of \$7,400 per annum, maximum. The latter condition meant that if PLTC were to, as it already had on occasion, pay any CETA contract worker the maximum of \$10,000 per year, it would have to compensate by offering to other workers salaries well below the \$7,400 mean.

PLTC also found itself hampered by the new stipulation that it could no longer convert to CETA contracts persons who had already proven their worth to the theatre through paid or even volunteer work. As Fruchter put it, "We'd find out that they were qualified in all things, except that they had had previous contact with the theatre-- that did make things a bit difficult."⁷²

What PLTC began to experience under these new hiring conditions reflects the national pattern in 1981. Citing a report from the Bureau of Social Science Research, Inc., the Washington Post pointed out that CETA enrollees in the low income bracket had risen from 74% in 1978 to 93% in 1980, and that more enrollees were high school dropouts or unskilled.⁷³ While these changes may have been in line with CETA's basic purposes, they augured a fall-off in the CETA worker quality that PLTC had enjoyed in the early years.

Describing the change, Fruchter said " . . . in recent years . . . we found CETA sending lesser and lesser qualified folks to us."⁷⁴ Robert Lohrmann points out that, despite their lack of theatre skills, about 50% of the new type structural, or hard core, unemployed managed by mere determination to become useful workers, if only as envelope stuffers or janitorial staff. Some of them were even picked up by PLTC. But Fruchter's overview of the situation was that in 1979-80 CETA worker quality fell "very, very low."⁷⁵

Thus, relative to worker quality, PLTC's CETA experience may be divided into two periods. From 1976 to 1979, quality was high; from 1979 on, it was poor.

How good the quality of the early period was can be validated by an examination of the eleven CETA worker resumes I was able to find in the PLTC files. Of the eleven, eight had earned a college degree in theatre or a related field. Six had worked in a summer stock company; four had significant actor training outside of college; and, though none were members of Equity when they joined the PLTC, at least six had been paid to act. Among the previous associations of the eleven persons were: the Stella Adler Theatre Studio, the Neighborhood Playhouse (2 persons), the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, and Carnegie Mellon's theatre program. In no way did the eleven represent the unskilled or untrained--instead, they represented a generally high level of non-union young theatre workers.

A second matter which deserves special attention is the relationship between the theatre and the prime sponsor. Although Fruchter does not believe the arts identity of PLTC to have been a positive value to Manpower, the relationship was cordial and informal, aided perhaps by their being community neighbors instead of distant grantor and grantee. To Fruchter, the relationship was "collegial" and "cooperative," a reflection, no doubt, of common goals--both parties wanted PLTC to grow. Fruchter courted Manpower with theatre tickets, flattery, and occasional appeals to conscience. In a letter supporting a request for new positions, he rose to political rhetoric:

Art is rarely a profitable enterprise: does this make it an unworthy one? I think you will agree that a governmental agency, such as your own, which does not produce income, is funded solely, (or should be) on the basis of the good it does. Can we be judged by the same criteria?⁷⁶

The relationship was marred, however, by at least one serious problem. In 1977, Manpower received a complaint from a CETA worker to the effect that PLTC CETA workers were being pressured to contribute part of their earnings to PLTC coffers. Manpower launched an investigation and issued a report on 22 July in the form of a letter to Fruchter.⁷⁷ Manpower concluded that PLTC had "actively solicited" employees, both CETA and non-CETA, to donate to the theatre regularly. According to Manpower Director Greiner's letter, CETA-paid workers had contributed up to 37% of their gross salaries to the theatre. Greiner stipulated that there was no evidence of coercion or illegality, but made it clear that further CETA funding depended not only on a cessation of such solicitations but a documented repayment to the CETA workers of the contributions already collected. Fruchter, who discussed the matter very openly, had no choice but to comply, and by December of 1977, had completed the repayment process. The final repayments, to two CETA workers, totalled \$1,329,⁷⁸ a significant sum to PLTC, one that suggests both the size of the contribution problem and the strain that PLTC must have been under to repay. Citing the Red Cross as a precedent for employee contributions to a non-profit agency, Fruchter denied that coercion was any part of the matter. He also recognized, however, that the anomaly of CETA workers being paid more than PLTC regulars may have led to a natural peer pressure for contributions; the most important

members of the company had long accustomed themselves to making financial sacrifices for the theatre, both by accepting low salaries and by contributing out of pocket. The latter practice would be virtually unheard of in an establishment resident company, but PLTC people had, for the most part, no experience in the establishment theatre. Thus, they might not think their own sacrifices extreme or an expectation of similar sacrifice by others to be exploitive. That PLTC was not, at any rate, caught up in an under-the-table kick-back scheme is proven clearly by the open recording of the contributions, by worker name, in PLTC's regular donation list. With the repayment by PLTC, the matter was quietly forgotten: the strong relationship with Manpower continued as before, and Fruchter had not even found it necessary to bring the matter before the PLTC Board.

There were other problems. In 1978, PLTC applied to Manpower for five CETA construction worker positions, a total request of \$51,590.⁷⁹ Had they been granted, the positions would have supplied skilled and semi-skilled labor for PLTC's renovation of and relocation to the Malvern barn-theatre. But, following national guidelines, Manpower denied the application on the grounds that CETA workers were not to be used in capital improvement. With their usual energy, PLTC regulars stepped in to provide their own labor. Repeating the national pattern, Manpower generally withheld administrative support, but Fruchter, who estimated that overhead costs associated with CETA workers did not surpass 6 to 8%, did not consider that a serious problem.

In general, PLTC's relations with its prime sponsor were very good. Manpower held PLTC to the specific limits mandated at the national level, but within those limits, it seems fair to say that Manpower exhibited an avuncular flexibility that might have been impossible in the more impersonal relationship which would be expected between a fairly humble young arts organization and a detached giver in Washington or a distant state capital.

Overall Impact

Morgan Management concluded its CETA/Arts report with several observations that apply well to PLTC's CETA experience. Among the positive impacts of CETA/Arts it listed community cultural development, skill development for individuals, and economic benefits for the jurisdiction whose residents achieved employment through CETA. All of these benefits appear in the case of PLTC: Chester County developed theatre consciousness and even formally adopted a theatre; workers moved from CETA-paid into employer paid jobs; and Chester County saw citizens removed from its unemployed rolls. CETA Ahead also concluded that mutual respect between prime sponsor and sub-contractor was a key factor in successful CETA programs. Here again, PLTC was exemplary.

But Morgan Management did not cite in its summary the single most striking conclusion to be drawn from the CETA/PLTC experience, which is that, under the proper circumstances, CETA contracts could, and, in the case of PLTC, probably did, provide the margin of survival for a struggling arts organization. Both ^hRob Lohrmann and Danny Fruchter acknowledge the essential role of CETA in PLTC's development.

Lohrmann confesses a nagging feeling that CETA's national mission was not to serve as it did PLTC in the critical first years—providing PLTC already trained personnel instead of paying it to train the unskilled. But the fact that CETA's stated training goals were largely forgotten is not to be laid at PLTC's or any other local door. Because it was an income transfer program in which approximately 70% of the money went to stipends, it was inevitable that CETA personnel would be thought of more as workers than as trainees. In addition, the relatively free hand of the prime sponsors allowed them to pay more attention to immediate local needs—jobs for the jobless and labor for public and non-profit employers—than to long term training goals. At any rate, the tightened guidelines of the 1978 reenactment bill tended to end the possibility of hiring the skilled and make organizations like PLTC begin to function a little more like training agencies.

Whatever his misgivings, Lohrmann is quick to point out that CETA dollars were "absolutely essential in terms of our maintainance" in the formative period.⁸⁰

As Fruchter saw it, had it not been for CETA money, PLTC would have remained—if it survived at all—a community theatre. There would have been no paid performers able to rehearse on a professional schedule, and career oriented people would have quickly decamped. " . . . there's no question in my mind that without CETA, People's Light and Theatre Company would not be a professional performing arts organization today."⁸¹

Though he was not thinking in such terms, Fruchter testified to the populist thrust of CETA/Arts when he called it "a miraculous dollars from heaven kind of situation in which a fledgling theatre company was able to actually pay people to do what it was they were trained to do."⁸² It was miraculous because neither NEA nor a major foundation nor a state arts council would have provided significant amounts of money to a no reputation theatre company of the sort PLTC was from 1973 to 1979. Only CETA had the capacity to so provide. CETA, precisely because its decisions were made by local agencies with no sense of an artistic establishment or elite, could and did back the new and unproved, promoting in Chester County a cultural democracy or populism.

Now that CETA is finished, PLTC remains vital and resourceful, but Fruchter believes its period of rapid growth to be over. No alternative source has been found to make up for the lost CETA funding, and Fruchter reports a continuing shift of money from the production budget to support services, a shift that will be reflected in shorter seasons employing fewer actors.

Perhaps the PLTC/CETA case is best summarized as a fortuitous fusion of an embryonic arts organization and government support ideally suited in terms of availability, amount, and, at least in the first years, a relative lack of encumbrance. Had similar amounts of money been available from other sources they would have been as helpful or, to the extent that they were without strings, even more so. But that the money was not available except through CETA is evidenced by the fact that PLTC,

now much better equipped to win support than it was when it first received CETA money, has been unable to find a substitute source.

A case study, of course, merely describes individual instances; it can establish no general rule or pattern. In this case, a single arts organization was raised up by CETA and now finds itself weakened, though not necessarily fatally, by CETA's demise. The question to be pursued by people interested in the relationship between government money and the arts is whether there is now a significant population of arts organizations which achieved significant growth by means of this virtually accidental form of government arts support.

Endnotes

¹I wish to thank the Pennsylvania State University's Institute for the Arts and Humanistic Studies for support essential to this research.

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